

Tennessee Succeeds

Building on what is working through the Every Student Succeeds Act

In fall 2015, the department released our strategic plan, *Tennessee Succeeds*, which outlined the five-year vision and work of the state. Through this plan, the department, in partnership with our education community, set big goals that will move us forward in our work to prepare all students to be successful after high school:

1. Tennessee will rank in the top half of all states on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) by 2019.
 - *As of fall 2015, we ranked in the top 25 on one NAEP assessment: fourth grade math.*
2. Seventy-five percent of Tennessee third graders will be proficient in reading by 2025.
 - *As of fall 2015, only 43 percent of third graders were reading on grade level or above.*
3. The average ACT composite score in Tennessee will be a 21 by 2020.
 - *As of fall 2015, our average public school composite was a 19.4.*
4. The majority of high school graduates from the class of 2020 will earn a postsecondary certificate, diploma, or degree.
 - *As of fall 2015, less than a quarter of high school graduates from the class of 2008 earned a postsecondary credential within six years.*

While there are a number of opportunities for continued improvement, our schools, educators, and students have achieved a number of remarkable successes in the past year. Here are a few bright spots:

- Our students again made Tennessee the **fastest improving state in the country**—this time in science. Tennessee moved into the top half of states in both fourth and eighth grade science, **moving us closer toward our first goal.**
- Our **graduation rate rose** to the highest on record: 88.5 percent.
- Our **college-going rate improved** by 5 percent—which is more than the increase from the past six years combined.
- State leaders made a **historic investment** in Tennessee’s education funding—the biggest increase in the history of the Basic Education Plan fund without a tax increase.
- Our high school students earned **more college credits**—7,500 more in 2016 compared to 2014.

- Public school students maintained our average ACT score, and **1,300 more students have become eligible for the HOPE scholarship.**
- High school seniors had a **new option to retake the ACT**, which nearly 24,000 signed up to take.
- We launched the **Read to be Ready** campaign, and alongside over 90 districts, we are building a network of **200 reading coaches** and executing on a new framework and vision for early literacy.
- Twenty **Read to be Ready summer programs** served almost 600 students and provided families with close to 12,000 books to take home.
- **Commissioner McQueen has visited more than 12,000 teachers, 148 schools, and 99 districts** so far on the Classroom Chronicles tour, and she launched the second leg to visit with high school students and hear about their dreams, opportunities, challenges, and how their schools are preparing them for life after graduation. In addition, the department led 26 student focus groups.
- The State Board of Education approved **new math and English language arts standards**, which will be used next year, and has been gathering feedback on social studies and science standards.
- We learned from our experience on the **new TNReady assessment**, and we have taken steps forward to improve the testing experience: establishing a new contract with a proven vendor to deliver TNReady, **reducing testing time this year by 30 percent**, and phasing into online testing.

Tennessee continues to experience challenges on the pathway to moving more students to success beyond high school. Here are a few that highlight the continuing urgency to improve:

- **Nearly 35 percent** of high school graduates do not enroll in postsecondary within two years of graduation.
- **Only 17 percent** of high school graduates in Tennessee are considered college and career ready on all four readiness benchmarks of the ACT.
- Although early postsecondary opportunities are widely available, just **40 percent of the 2015 graduating class attempted one. Less than 25 percent** of high school graduates earn early postsecondary credit.
- Students in **historically underserved student groups** continue to struggle. For example, while overall 43 percent of third graders were reading on grade level in 2015, only 32 percent of those identified as economically disadvantaged were reading proficiently, and that dropped to just 22 percent of English learners and 20 percent for students with disabilities.
- About 14 percent of kindergartners and 16 percent of ninth graders were **chronically absent** in 2015-16.

Opportunities for the work ahead

Through *Tennessee Succeeds*, we set priority areas: **early foundations and literacy, high school and the bridge to postsecondary, all means all, educator support, and district empowerment.** These build on our educational foundation: **high standards, aligned assessments, and strong accountability.** Since the launch of the strategic plan, we have taken key steps in each of these areas, and we believe we are on the right path—and now we are building on this work through our ESSA state plan.

In May, we launched a statewide feedback tour, and so far, we have heard from more than 2,500 individuals and organizations. As we prepare to submit the final ESSA plan to the U.S. Department of Education in the spring, we want to hear from more stakeholders to ensure we have a plan that builds on our successes, meets the needs of Tennessee's students, and helps us capitalize on our opportunities.

Opportunity One: Set high expectations that align to postsecondary and workforce readiness so all of Tennessee's students are able to pursue their chosen path in life.

The majority of Tennessee's college faculty and employers tell us that high school graduates are not ready for the expectations they have in their classrooms and the work place. By setting high standards for all students, and by aligning those to instructional practices and state assessments that ensure students stay on track each year, every Tennessee child will have the opportunity to pursue their dreams after high school.

Opportunity Two: Attend to the needs of all students in pre-K-12—especially historically disadvantaged students—so they can experience success after high school.

It is our responsibility to close our achievement gaps so each child—regardless of their race, gender, socioeconomic status, or zip code—receives a world-class education. Through supporting the whole child and the environment in which he or she learns, we will promote equity and excellence for all our students.

Opportunity Three: Provide support, funding, intervention, and innovation for persistently low-performing schools.

While many of our schools are continually improving, students in some of our schools have dramatically lower outcomes. We want to take a coordinated approach to turning around these schools by focusing on and investing in the people who are doing this hard work and the support networks around those educators.

Opportunity Four: Focus on strengthening and supporting educators.

Having a high-quality teacher is the biggest in-school factor on a student's success, but often our students who are most behind do not have access to our most effective teachers. We want to comprehensively strengthen the profession by recruiting, retaining, and rewarding educators and by providing more—and better—opportunities for them to develop their craft.

Opportunity Five: Empower districts to drive toward student goals.

We believe the state's primary role is to support districts and incentivize the right outcomes, rather than directly manage classrooms. Under this theory of action, we are increasing the tools, data, and support available for districts. Through the district accountability framework, we are encouraging districts to ensure that all their students are learning and that their classrooms meet the school-level accountability that ESSA and Tennessee state law requires. We are also providing opportunities for districts to take their strengths further.

Opportunity One: Set high expectations that align to postsecondary and workforce readiness so all of Tennessee's students are able to pursue their chosen path in life.

The majority of Tennessee's college faculty and employers tell us that high school graduates are not ready for the expectations they have in their classrooms and the work place. By setting high standards for all students, and by aligning those to instructional practices and state assessments that ensure students stay on track each year, every Tennessee child will have the opportunity to pursue their dreams after high school.

**What we have started under our strategic plan, *Tennessee Succeeds*,
and how we will build on this work through ESSA:**

- **Setting high expectations through the Tennessee Academic Standards**

Our educators worked through extensive public feedback to craft the Tennessee Academic Standards, which set high expectations for what students should know and be able to do in each grade in order to be on track to graduate from high school equipped with the skills and knowledge needed for success. The state has led comprehensive standards reviews in four subjects: math, English language arts, science, and social studies.

- **Creating TNReady assessments that focus on problem-solving and critical thinking**

We are ensuring that students are meeting our high expectations through fully-aligned assessments that are designed to see whether students are truly learning the content and are developing the problem-solving and critical thinking skills they need. We also have sought to be thoughtful about changes to our assessment program, including reducing testing by 30 percent for the 2016-17 school year and phasing in online assessments over multiple years. Through ESSA, we are proposing additional reductions in the amount of time that our third and fourth grade students spend on TNReady and are continuing to explore ways to potentially reduce testing in 11th grade through a study in partnership with the Tennessee Organization of School Superintendents (TOSS).

- **Sharing better information for educators, families, and students**

Educators and families have asked for better feedback about how students are progressing compared to grade-level expectations. Educators, families, and students are receiving redesigned score reports to understand how students performed on TNReady, areas of strength, and where to focus on helping students grow. They also have access to new web tools and parent documents that are being translated into our families' most common languages. In addition, we are working to provide this feedback on a faster timeline to make the information as helpful as possible.

- **Ensuring districts and schools are preparing students to be ready**

A new component of our accountability framework for districts and schools will look at whether students are actually ready for college, careers, and life when they leave high school. This "Ready Graduate" indicator will look at a number of readiness metrics, including graduation rate, ACT scores, and

completion of early postsecondary courses along with attainment of industry certifications. In addition, the department will publish a transparency metric for high schools that shows students' matriculation rate into college alongside postsecondary completion rates.

- **Providing more ACT opportunities**

All districts now have the opportunity to take advantage of the state's ACT preparation course, and all students can retake the ACT at no cost. These strategies will provide opportunities for all students to be prepared and perform well on their college admissions exam.

- **Streamlining assessment requirements**

ESSA still requires states, districts, and schools to have 95 percent of students take annual state assessments, but Tennessee is seeking to minimize the overall time spent on testing. The state is also continuing to explore ways to streamline assessments, including interim assessments for RTI² (Response to Instruction and Intervention). At the same time, we are working toward providing additional access to TNReady assessment questions for local use and alignment to standards for instruction.

What does this mean for district and school administrators and teachers?

- Districts will receive funding to offer early postsecondary courses, including ACT prep.
- Teachers and administrators will receive new score reports that provide better details and more helpful breakout information about how students performed on state assessments and how standards were met, which will help them make decisions about how to best address the needs of their students.
- Teachers will be trained on the new standards in math and English language arts this spring, and they will use them in their classrooms next year. Social studies standards will be implemented in the 2017-18 school year, and science will follow in the 2018-19 school year.
- While our teachers have always been and will continue to be part of our TNReady assessment development and scoring process—for example, hundreds of Tennessee educators review, edit, and approve test questions, and they set the standards and criteria for how our test is scored—now they will also be part of the process of initially writing test questions, too.

What does this mean for students and families?

- Families and students will receive better information about how students are performing based on our educators' grade-level expectations through redesigned score reports and a new website.
- Students will spend less time testing this year—well over three hours less for the average student.
- High school students have both the opportunity to take the ACT during their regular school year and to retake it in the fall for free.

Opportunity Two: Attend to the needs of all students in pre-K-12—especially historically disadvantaged students—so they can experience success after high school.

It is our responsibility to close our achievement gaps so each child—regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status, or zip code—receives a world-class education. Through supporting the whole child and the environment in which he or she learns, we will promote equity and excellence for all our students.

**What we have started under our strategic plan, *Tennessee Succeeds*,
and how we will build on this work through ESSA:**

- **Including English learners (ELs) in our accountability systems**

Districts and schools will now be held accountable for English learners as a student group through our accountability frameworks. Beginning in July 2017, the state will begin using a new screener to determine whether students should enter EL programming. To exit English as a second language programs, at minimum, students must meet specific benchmarks on the WIDA ACCESS assessment, which is specifically for EL students. Students will also be monitored for a period after exiting services.

- **Ensuring each child has an opportunity to learn**

As part of our new accountability framework, Tennessee is proposing a new metric that will seek to capture whether students are able to grow and thrive in their school environments. This new “Opportunity to Learn” indicator will incorporate chronic absenteeism in the 2017-18 year. The department will consider using additional data points, particularly discipline data, in future years.

- **Focusing on supporting the whole child**

For students to access academic learning fully, their capacity for personal awareness and social development must also grow. By 2017, the department, along with stakeholders from across the state, will develop social and personal competencies and supports to ensure students develop soft skills and workforce readiness skills. Additionally, the state is transitioning to a new policy that prioritizes ensuring that school counselors are available to counsel students, versus being tasked with other school activities.

- **Supporting well-rounded school environments**

Districts will have more flexibility through a Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant and other funding to support arts, music, foreign language instruction, expanded coursework, advanced learning opportunities, and specialized instructional personnel, among other opportunities. Beginning in the 2017-18 school year, the district and school needs assessment will be expanded to address well-rounded components, including school climate and culture. Tennessee will also continue a wide array of student-focused activities in health and school safety. Strategies include the state’s Student Advisory Councils, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, family and community engagement, and others.

- **Providing all students with access to high-quality teaching**

A key to ensuring that all children can succeed is the quality of their classroom teacher. Through ESSA, Tennessee will continue to implement its Teacher Equity Plan and continue conversations about how to create the right incentives and support structures to encourage our best teachers to serve in the areas of greatest need. This work is discussed in more detail in opportunity four. Additionally, targeted funding for recruitment of a diverse teaching force that reflects the student population is a priority.

- **Focusing on multiple ways to show progress**

Through ESSA, Tennessee is focusing on accountability systems that hold districts and schools accountable for ensuring that all students are learning and growing while still including multiple pathways for demonstrating students' progress, achievement, and readiness for life after high school.

What does this mean for district and school administrators and teachers?

- Districts will be trained on the new WIDA screener for EL programming beginning late spring and through June 2017.
- Districts will get new block grant funding through the Title IV Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant that could help them build up their guidance office, increase community engagement, add school-based mental health services, and/or expand the number of well-rounded activities and learning opportunities that are available to students.
- Schools and teachers could have new programming or specialized personnel onsite to help support students' well-rounded growth.

What does this mean for students and families?

- Students will have access to more learning opportunities, depending on what their district decides to offer and invest in.
- All students will have effective teachers who also reflect the range of diversity we have in our student population.
- All students will have learning environments that help them grow and thrive.
- Students who have been historically disadvantaged, especially those who are economically disadvantaged, will have access to more resources and support systems to help ensure their needs are met.

Opportunity Three: Provide support, funding, intervention, and innovation for persistently low-performing schools.

While many of our schools are continually improving, students in some of our schools have dramatically lower outcomes. We want to take a coordinated approach to turning around these schools by focusing on and investing in the people who are doing this hard work and the support networks around those educators.

What we have started under our strategic plan, *Tennessee Succeeds*, and how we will build on this work through ESSA:

- **Identifying struggling schools**

Based on clear input from stakeholders, Tennessee will continue to identify the lowest performing 5 percent of schools as Priority Schools. Under ESSA, these schools are referred to as “comprehensive support” schools. Additionally, we will continue to identify Focus Schools based on the performance of historically underserved students, and those schools that have the lowest performance relative rank are designated as receiving “targeted support” in ESSA.

- **Empowering districts to intervene in the lowest-performing schools**

The state is taking a new approach to interventions and the level of state action within Priority Schools. The department aims to create a culture of high expectations and belief in continuous improvement within a flexible framework of earned autonomy and choice for districts, so that districts will be charged and empowered to serve and improve Priority Schools. Districts will ensure every school has a strong leader, educators with the skill and will to teach in these schools, and appropriate services for students so that all children will be equipped with the knowledge and skills to embark on their chosen path.

- **Providing additional funding through formula and competitive grants**

The state will provide both formula funding and competitive grants for districts to improve their lowest-performing schools. All Priority Schools will receive a planning grant in the first year after identification in 2017. Districts will apply on behalf of Priority Schools for development grants, which will be awarded competitively to support improvements through investment in strong leadership, effective instruction, and a supportive framework for learning. Districts may also have the opportunity to apply for Innovation Zone grants to support multiple Priority Schools.

- **Developing a school improvement continuum with three tracks for intervention**

Tennessee has developed a school improvement continuum that clearly articulates requirements, expectations, and proof points for districts and schools. The proposed continuum creates three intervention tracks for Priority Schools that will be based on multiple factors and which will rely on improving students' achievement and growth through district-led, evidence-based interventions. If a school is not improving based on the proof points, then that school will become eligible for state intervention, which is the Achievement School District.

- **Creating the School Improvement Support Network**

One element of Tennessee's school improvement continuum is to add capacity through the School Improvement Support Network (SISN). The SISN will work directly with districts and Priority Schools on assessing their needs by focusing on root cause analysis, conducting a readiness review, developing a plan for improvement, and supporting and monitoring progress. The SISN will provide support within four focus areas: school plan development, strong leadership, effective instruction, and supportive frameworks for learning.

What does this mean for district and school administrators and teachers?

- Districts will have the first opportunity to improve Priority Schools and establish a comprehensive plan with additional funding for impactful intervention.
- Districts will receive additional support and funding for their lowest performing schools. These funds can be used to implement evidence-based interventions like recruiting and retaining great teachers and leaders, providing professional development to teachers, or investing in services for students.
- Districts serving Priority Schools will be trained on using the needs assessment and root cause analysis to identify the biggest challenges and determine the best interventions to spur improvement.
- Schools that are the lowest performing will have access to more state-level support through the School Improvement Support Network.
- Educators and school and district administrators will understand how a school is identified as a Priority or Focus School and the state's expectations for improving these schools.
- Educators and school and district administrators will better understand when and how a school becomes eligible for and exits the Achievement School District.

What does this mean for students and families?

- Students attending the lowest performing schools will have additional resources and services available that can support their academic growth and improve their whole school environment.
- Students, families, and community members will know why schools are identified as Priority or Focus Schools and what level of support the state can provide.
- Students, families, and community members will have a clear understanding of when and how a school can become eligible for the Achievement School District and how it can exit.

Opportunity Four: Focus on strengthening and supporting educators.

Having a high-quality teacher is the biggest in-school factor on a student's success, but often our students who are most behind do not have access to our most effective teachers. We want to comprehensively strengthen the profession by recruiting, retaining, and rewarding educators and by providing more—and better—opportunities for them to develop their craft.

What we have started under our strategic plan, *Tennessee Succeeds*, and how we will build on this work through ESSA:

- **Enhancing data systems to provide better feedback**

Tennessee has developed and will continue to support a robust data system, which provides reports and other data to districts, schools, and educators. The human capital data reports and other educator feedback will support the structure of educator preparation, development, and support.

- **Strengthening educator preparation**

We must continue to improve how we recruit, retain, grow, support, and reward educators across the state. ESSA provides an opportunity to refine the ongoing work in educator preparation, ensure new teachers are prepared in year one, and sustain an effective educator pipeline through training, differentiated pay, and other incentives.

- **Supporting pathways to leadership**

Tennessee will continue to support and provide opportunities for teachers to develop their leadership skills and serve beyond their classrooms. New funding will be available through competitive grants for principal and teacher residency programs, as well as ongoing state initiatives, including the Tennessee Teacher Leader Network, the Principal Peer Partnership program, and the Governor's Academy for School Leadership.

- **Improving professional development**

The department is supporting districts by providing more effective, personalized professional learning opportunities and new tools for tracking and evaluating professional development, such as a rigorous professional learning rubric. The state is also continuing its Instructional Partnership Initiative, which leverages existing expertise by strategically pairing teachers in the same school based on complementary strengths and areas for growth in specific areas. Through the Read to be Ready Coaching Network and increased focus on literacy, the state is investing more in helping teachers develop a deeper understanding of what strong reading instruction looks like.

- **Clearly designing evaluation systems and growth models**

Tennessee is continuing with its robust educator evaluation system, which combines qualitative data with quantitative and portfolio growth measures, to determine overall levels of effectiveness. We are also committed to increasing the number of portfolio options available to provide more educators with collective feedback on their students' growth, including rolling out a statewide portfolio for pre-K and kindergarten teachers that is coupled with training and support at the building level to help educators learn more and understand the benefits of the portfolio model.

- **Ensuring all students have effective teachers in their classrooms**

Our state continues to refine how we examine equity gaps between schools to ensure that all students have access to highly effective teachers. ESSA underscores equity as a key provision, and Tennessee will ensure that districts all students have access to effective teachers and that our lowest-performing students are not regularly assigned to less-effective teachers. Moving forward, the state will also provide a transparency metric around where Tennessee's most effective educators are located and the types of students and courses they are teaching to help inform conversations and decisions at the district, school, and classroom-level.

What does this mean for district and school administrators and teachers?

- Districts will have access to data that provides details about teacher effectiveness, teacher equity gaps, and teacher mobility to inform personnel decisions.
- Schools will receive equitable access to effective teachers, especially schools serving historically underserved students.
- Teachers and administrators in rural and high-need areas will have access to new teacher and principal residency programs.
- Teachers in non-tested grades will have the opportunity to have an individual growth measure.
- Districts with voluntary pre-K programs will utilize a portfolio growth model to evaluate pre-K and kindergarten teachers.
- New teachers will be better prepared on day one through edTPA and other partnership programs.

What does this mean for students and families?

- Students and families will have access to more information about their schools and teachers.
- More students will have equitable access to effective teachers.

Opportunity Five: Empower districts to drive toward student goals.

We believe the state's primary role is to support districts and incentivize the right outcomes, rather than directly manage classrooms. Under this theory of action, we are increasing the tools, data, and supports available for districts. Through the district accountability framework, we are encouraging districts to ensure that all their students are learning and that their classrooms meet the school-level accountability that ESSA and Tennessee state law requires. We are also providing opportunities for districts to take their strengths further.

What we have started under our strategic plan, *Tennessee Succeeds*, and how we will build on this work through ESSA:

- **Aligning our state goals and systems**

The goals in *Tennessee Succeeds* can only be achieved if districts take on this work and make it their own and if all of the state's systems are driving toward the same outcomes. As part of that work, the department is aligning its comprehensive monitoring processes via ePlan, the online planning and grants management system for districts. The department is also helping to inform decisions on initiatives and investments—for example, we are now asking districts to share how they will address teacher equity issues or low performance of their students with disabilities in the needs assessment in ePlan.

- **Equipping districts and sharing best practices while spurring innovation**

In September, the department provided directors of schools with a district strategies document that was tailored to each individual district. The document provided a series of local data points, comparison metrics, and ideas about targeted strategies that districts could consider within each priority area that would drive student and school improvement and success. This strategies document will become an annual tool for improvement, and the department will provide new competitive grants for districts to continue to push and innovate in areas of strength.

- **Helping districts maximize funding**

The single-greatest need identified by Tennessee districts is for additional fiscal resources, particularly around funding changes and program sustainability. To help districts fully leverage their flexibility for how they fund programs, the department released a coordinated spending guide so districts can better streamline spending across federal, state, and local resources, maximizing the overall funding that districts receive. The department will revise the guide to comply with ESSA, helping districts use their funding flexibility to support their students while encouraging innovation.

- **Supporting districts through regional offices**

Regional support offices, called Centers of Regional Excellence (CORE), work most closely with our districts. CORE offices also include regional specialists, and the department will work with TNTTP to train all CORE English language arts consultants to build their understanding of the instructional practices that are influencing current reading achievement and support them in targeting improvements.

- **Providing opportunities to personalize learning for students and teachers**

The department will continue and expand upon several initiatives that can help districts tailor learning, including blended learning models, which combine in-classroom learning and online coursework; competency-based learning pilots, which allow students to move through a course based on mastering the content, not on the amount of time spent; and micro-credentialing, which offers educators the chance to develop and earn recognition for demonstrating specific skills. In addition, the department will continue to provide opportunities for educators to learn from highly effective peers through Networked Improvement Communities and provide opportunities for educators to gain more insight into the out-of-school challenges their economically disadvantaged students face through poverty simulations.

- **Sharing clearer information about schools' performance**

Beginning in school year 2017-18, every school will receive a summative letter grade (A-F) that is aligned to Tennessee's district accountability framework under ESSA and required by a new Tennessee state law. This system will value both student growth and student achievement, providing parents, educators and stakeholders an easy-to-understand summative overview of their schools and a baseline for comparison. This system will also value multiple measures, including students' overall achievement and growth on state assessments, graduation rates, participation rates on state assessments, students' progress in achieving English language proficiency, and the Ready Student and Opportunity to Learn indicators. There will be multiple ways to show success, and all schools will have the opportunity to earn an "A."

What does this mean for district and school administrators and teachers?

- District leaders are receiving tailored information from the department about their performance—relative to the state and their peers—and ideas for strategies that may drive improvement.
- District administrators will have access to more streamlined planning and funding information in ePlan, encouraging them to think through ways to streamline their work and tie investments back to our bigger goals.
- Districts will receive more guidance on ways they can maximize and flexibly use their federal, state, and local funding to support their students.
- Districts will have the opportunity to work with regional specialists, particularly in English language arts, to improve instructional practices around reading.
- Educators may receive more individualized learning opportunities, such as through micro-credentialing and opportunities to network with peers.

What does this mean for students and families?

- Families will have clearer, easy-to-understand feedback about how schools are performing.
- Students may have opportunities to participate in innovative pilot programs, such as competency-based learning models that let them move through a course at the pace that works for them.